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ABSTRACT

This summary of the written responses of participants in the Plenary Session of the 1985 World Conference of the International Council for Distance Education begins with a review of the session's specific goals: (1) to present selected ideas and arguments from two perspectives--a traditional pedagogical one and an open, andragogical one; allow participants to articulate their own personal perspective; and (3) given this perspective, to enable each participant to list one or two issues demanding attention. The key issues that emerged as a result of 234 returned lists are summarized under six themes: (1) the definition and enhancement of the identity of distance education as a field of education; (2) the integration of different types of programs, including credit and non-credit education and training, and enrichment and job training courses; (3) growth in the provision of access and resources; (4) learner-centeredness, i.e., meeting the needs of learners through more flexible education structures and freedom to work more independently with learners in course selection; (5) flexibility in dealing with administrative issues and in the design of learning; and (6) assessment of the use of technology, success in learning, and general acceptability of distance mode qualifications. (DJR)

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Issues for Attention

A summary of written contributions from participants at the final Plenary Session

Liz Burge

Session design

Two broad assumptions supported a design for the Plenary that was both interactive and innovative. The first assumption was that informed professional practice depends not only on the use of appropriate personal philosophy—a critical knowledge about the reasons for one's practice. Without such an articulation, field practice may show internal consistencies; or, more seriously, incongruences between what is preached and what is actually practised. The second assumption was that after an intensive conference week, participants may want to reflect and talk to more abstract and personal levels about learning and teaching.

The specific goals of the session were to i) present selected ideas and arguments from two different perspectives—a traditional and pedagogical one, and an open and andragogical one; ii) allow the participants to talk to each other and articulate their own personal perspective ("Where do I stand on this very complex continuum?"); and iii) given this perspective, enable each participant to list one or two issues demanding attention.

Barbara Spronk and Mary Ngechu presented arguments supporting open approaches and Gomathi Mani and Christine von Prummer presented some traditional approaches. (Note—the arguments each colleague presented were not necessarily a reflection of her personal values).

These abbreviated presentations drew out responses and questions—all of which helped to confirm the complexity of developing an articulated, coherent perspective. Then, for twenty minutes, the theatre noise and energy levels rose markedly as colleagues worked in pairs to articulate their own perspectives. It was very rewarding to see colleagues talking, as Kevin Smith put it, *to* each other and not *past* each other.

Finally, each participant was given a form on which to record his/her issues. We expected to have returned approximately 80 forms—coming from one third of approximately 250 participants. In fact, 234 forms were returned—to contribute a total of 450 individual statements of issues.

Publication deadlines for this report prevented an exhaustive qualitative analysis. However, every issue was recorded under pre-determined headings to see approximate frequency distributions. On the whole these distributions were low—there were so many different issues! Gradually six broad themes became evident. Each issue was cross-checked against a theme to test its appropriateness for inclusion: since 90% of these statements could be included under a theme, the thematic organization was followed for this summary. Participants will allow that not every statement could be included verbatim, and that some handwriting proved to be illegible. Quotations have been used to highlight dimensions of each theme. Where the word 'several' occurs, it refers to 3 to 5 responses.

The themes are Identity, Integration, Growth, Learner-Centredness, Flexibility and Assessment. Readers will see many connections between these themes and may wish to develop their own interpretations of these concepts. If nothing else, this present articulation reflects some of the current maturity of distance-mode learning and its facilitation.

Theme I: Identity

I grouped issues statements as they related to defining and enhancing the identity of distance education as a field of education. Fourteen respondents referred to identity in terms of either definition, upgrading or broadening of its application to education generally:

> We should be opening up learning . . . Place distance education as a discipline more firmly in perspective.

The development of theoretical bases of distance education were important to seven respondents: e.g.

> The construction of theoretical perspectives which . . . break from the expectation that external courses must be duplicates of internal courses . . . an integrated philosophical approach . . . move distance education theory [to a] student centred view.

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Eleven respondents specifically listed aspects of professional development of distance educators: e.g.

> The need to educate [them] in openness and flexibility of thought . . . [persuade] governments to invest in *training* distance educators . . . educators who are remote from the centres of power are not adequately trained . . . to cope with methodologies that are so distant from their previous . . . experience.

Other responses can be linked to identity because they referred to greater information exchange and development:

> To spread the existing knowledge more widely rather than to pretend to add to it . . . a systematic approach . . . develop increased public awareness . . . to generate political support and growth.

Exchanges of non-culture bound materials (do such exist?), better data bases, coordinations of personnel working in similar subject areas, and research programs in third world were also mentioned by individual respondents.

The concerns felt by this next respondent were echoed by several others:

> We need to go beyond our identity crisis and get on with the affairs that are important in education. I believe we are too involved in attempting to set ourselves aside from other educators and develop our own theory, philosophy, etc. Education c education!

Theme 2: Integration

This theme applied to both inter- and intra-institutional issues, and to international development. Calls were made for greater integration between different types of programs—formal (credit) and non-formal (non-credit) education and training, enrichment and job training courses. Thirteen participants wanted to see distance education converging with classroom based education: but definitely not regarding it as a second class alternative! Several wanted to have this integration modelled in institutional practice.

> There is no *single* solution—i.e., distance or on campus—that meets the needs of all situations . . . [see] distance education as complementing traditional education and *not* as an alternative.

An expansion of distance education into traditional sectors which presently do not use distance modes was specifically listed by nine respondents.

> . . . reconcile into a unified whole . . . spread the word on developing flexible approaches in formal and non formal courses . . . development of public relations for wider acceptance of [distance education] . . . political action to break down the ivory towers of formal institutions.

Inter-institutional collaboration and cooperation was a specific concern for ten respondents, and between them they noted accreditation, research, courses and programmes, and design and implementation as issues. Several respondents explained their concern with collaboration in terms of current resource and funding constraints.

International development as a broad goal was indicated in various references to developing countries and their needs for support from developed countries. Calls for practical assistance were made. One respondent suggested the establishment of sister/brother pairing of institutions—rather like the concept of sister or twin cities. Others were less specific:

> Reduce the gap . . . provide support (technological and advisory) . . . something which distance education is well suited to [do] . . . social equity—there is a real danger that technology, delivery systems will further widen gaps between haves and have-nots.

One respondent referred to the need to educate governments, especially in Africa, to recognise the role [that] distance education can play, and another said that distance education should be managed [so that] it "provides degree-oriented education . . . and functional literacy". The same respondent listed as a second issue the need for the ICDE to "refine the tools of distance education in the [developing] societies in particular".

Theme 3: Growth

The concept (and goal) of growth is implied in the first two themes, but it is worth distinction here for two significant dimensions—access and resource provision. Eighteen respondents listed increased access generally as an issue, and several referred specifically to gender and socio-economic status issues—e.g.

> Women and increased access . . . do we simply respond to the needs of the ruling section of a society, or aim . . . to the more disadvantaged groups?

Specific kinds of education—informal, basic, vocational, primary and continuing education were identified by seven respondents. Increased access in developing countries was a concern for fifteen people. Four other responses related to administrative concerns:

> Making sure that open door policies are not allowed to become revolving door policies . . . [adapting] existing traditional institutions to [improve] access . . . [keeping] a balance between traditional and non-traditional approaches to access . . . and how to use technologies to help access.

One respondent called for a redefinition of education in terms of its openness of access, and several mentioned the need for greater attention to the pre-adult age group getting elementary and secondary school level education).

Not surprisingly, the improvement of existing resources—both qualitative and quantitative—emerged as a key issue for many respondents. The problem of balancing course expansion demands with those of resource constraints was implied or stated in several responses: eg.

> A realistic assessment of where the resources will come from for broadening [access to d.e.] . . . resources—given government concentration on youth and school leavers.

Perhaps this statement says it all:

> The best means of producing the most of the shrinking global education dollar—this encompasses many issues—e.g., collaboration, centralized or decentralized system, credentialism vs open access.

Theme 4: Learner-Centredness

This theme emerged as a strong and central one: it related to both overt and covert statements about meeting the needs of learners. Implied references to learner needs were seen in statements calling for more flexible educational structures, and greater freedoms for educators to work more independently with learners in course selection.

Thirty issue statements alluded specifically to the needs and/or wants of learners. Individual learning styles; relevance of course studies to personal life; person-specific learning, not learning based on an average male view of the curriculum; negotiation of content and credentials to reflect needs of learners, i.e., "the world of study and the world of work"; the linking to work into learning, the appropriate use of hardware, matching teaching and learning styles, and the use of women's perspectives and experience of the world were each mentioned by several respondents. One respondent distinguished between a traditional curriculum and a functional one, in relation to the needs of learners at various stages of dependence and independence. Another wanted to have educators check their own assumptions about a learner's curriculum needs.

One respondent centred her/his two issues on the andragogy vs pedagogy debate, and called for research and practice that will develop a better understanding or appropriate methodologies.

Thirteen respondents were concerned about support services and skills for learners. The development of learning-how-to-learn skills, the use of counselling services, the attention given to the learner's socio-cultural environment, the extent of the help needed by underprivileged people and the ability of institutions to provide that specialist help, and a call for educators to check their own assumptions around support were issues of specific concern:

> We must get to students before they enrol so that we help them choose the most appropriate education for their needs . . . include skills and resource identification and development and reduce emphasis on content.

One respondent's issue statement provides an excellent but challenging conclusion:

> Moving distance education (philosophy, if you will) out of the province of administrators, who adopt an expedient, cost-efficient, institution-based view, to a point of view which is student-centred and is dominated by theories of learning.

Theme 5: Flexibility

It was hardly surprising that this theme became obvious rather early in the analysis, given the conference theme, and the interrelationships between issues! Specifically, however, flexibility was reflected in statements relating to administrative issues, and in the design of learning.

Learning design issues were of specific concern to eleven respondents. Representative statements are:

> Let's make more of the flexibility we have . . . flexible designs for individual learning given by academic institutions which now seem to be more interested in comparing with traditional institutions than giving attention to the students' needs . . . how to make distance education *really* flexible without giving up the academic standard.

Many of the thirty-seven statements referring to the use of hardware were related to the concept of flexibility and appropriate use by learners:

> Develop a cost efficient, user-oriented strategy which avoids too much inherited wisom . . . the usë of technology to create more individualized programs for students.

Administrative issues related to flexibility appeared to centre on institutional responses to market demands and to the work of faculty.

> The constraints of the demand that credit-granting institutions place on flexible modes of learning . . . flexibility in terms of providing demand-led courses quickly for lower numbers of students (as distinct from supply-led for larger numbers) . . . [are] flexible study patterns compatible with conventional tertiary education?

In the eleven statements referring to faculty activity, there were three major emphases:

> Attracting faculty into d.e. work, reducing their workloads, providing training . . . innovations in facilitating learning/teaching at a distance [should] antagonism to d.e. . . . reduce [their] unproductive workload (i.e., paperwork).

Theme 6: Assessment

This theme was reflected most in statments relating to hardware. Some of the factors relating to hardware have already been mentioned, but it is worth adding emphasis to the concerns about educators being technology-driven. Three representative statements:

> The optimum use of technology, and [not being] slaves to new innovations . . . not allowing the technologists to run away with education for too often there is a deplorable lack of [underlying justification] . . . high tech, one-way delivery systems have the power and potential to serve the interests of the power elite.

The assessment of success in learning was listed by several respondents as an issue. One called for a critical assessment of the validity of examination as the end-point in a course or programme, another called for broader and more sophisticated understandings of multi-dimensional cultural contexts to support broader assessments of success. The smallest statement of all is the biggest in implication: "increase success rates".

A final dimension of the assessment theme relates to a more public process—the general acceptability of distance mode qualifications. Seven respondents referred to legitimisation:

> Final acceptance . . . as *at least* the equals of the traditional deliverers . . . not a second best choice . . . and . . . a viable alternative.

Summary

Some of the issues statements we regard as familiar, others have been states in ways which may both unfreeze some of our present mind sets and encourage us to innovate still further. What struck me during this analysis was a certain liberalization of attitudes and increased questioning of our philosophies and practice. The expected development of this "critical knowing" about ourselves will be a development in sophistication.

While no statistically significant numbers of issues emerged, what is of particular interest in this exercise is the emphasis on integration and on the learner's perspective. If this emphasis reflects our own needs for informal intellectual explorations and interdependence with other educators, we have indeed reached a certain maturity and confidence.

. . .